GEOGRAPHIC NEWS BULLETINS

Published Weekly by

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

(The National Geographic Society is a scientific and educational Society, wholly altruistic, incorporated under the Federal law as a non-commercial institution for the increase of geographic knowledge and its popular diffusion.)

General Headquarters, Washington, D. C.

Contents for Week of January 5, 1931. Vol. IX. No. 24

1. Why Do We Start Our New Year on January 1?
2. Kottbus Feasts on Eels and Cucumbers.
3. A Bird's-Eye View of Devil's Island.
4. World-Wide Styles in Hairdress.
5. A Plant That Grew without Soil.

© *National Geographic Society*

THE SCHOOL "BUS" IN KOTTBUS, GERMANY

(See Bulletin No. 2)

HOW TEACHERS MAY OBTAIN THE BULLETINS

The Geographic News Bulletins are published weekly throughout the school year (thirty issues) and will be mailed to teachers for one year upon receipt of 25 cents (in stamps or money order). Entered as second-class matter, January 27, 1922, at the Post Office at Washington, D. C., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Acceptance for mailing at special rate of postage provided for in section 1103, Act of October 3, 1917, authorized February 9, 1922.

GEOGRAPHIC NEWS BULLETIN

Published Weekly by

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

(Founded in 1888 for the Increase and Diffusion of Geographic Knowledge)

General Headquarters, Washington, D. C.

Why Do We Start Our New Year on January 1?

WHY start the new year on January 1?

And why is our newest year numbered 1931?

Put the first question to the first ten persons you meet and you may get three satisfactory answers.

Put the second question to the same persons and perhaps half of them will insist that exactly 1930 years have elapsed since the birth of Christ.

It would be reasonably correct to answer both questions by the statement: "Because of an error."

January 1 is Arbitrary Starting Point

There is really no reason for starting each new year on the day called January 1, except that Julius Caesar so decreed it when he reformed the calendar about 1977 years ago. But the day of the year that Caesar called "January 1" is not the day that we so designate. Instead it is the day that we now call "December 28."

Because Caesar assumed the year to be 11 minutes and 14 seconds longer than it really is, the dates "crawled" through the centuries, away from the positions that he gave them, until by 1582 they were fourteen days out of place. "January 1" had advanced almost to the middle of the "January" marked out by Caesar.

In attempting to correct this difference, Pope Gregory turned the calendar back, not to its position in Caesar's day, but to its position at the time of the Church Council of Nicaea in 325 A. D., when the calendar already had crawled forward four days. Had Pope Gregory made a complete correction, January 1 would have fallen on the day that we now call "December 28."

But, after all, the fact that January 1 is still four days away from the position fixed by the decree of a Roman emperor is of no great significance. The really important matter is that the date shall not drift from its moorings, so to speak, and take up new positions with reference to the seasons; and its stability within a very tiny range was assured by the corrections which Pope Gregory made.

The Year is Like a Circle

The year is a repetition of the same months and days, and can best be thought of as a circle. (The Aztecs used a circular calendar carved in stone. See illustration following Bulletin No. 2.) A trip around a circle can start at any point; and similarly the year could be thought of as starting on any day. In fact, throughout the past, different peoples have started the year in all four of the seasons. The Jews began their year early in September, the Romans on March 25, the Egyptians on September 21, the Greeks on December 21, and the Persians on August 11.

There are, however, four logical places to start a new year, based on star observations. These are: the winter solstice, which in 1930 fell on December 22; the summer solstice, June 21; the spring equinox, March 21; and the autumn equinox, September 23. Julius Caesar and his astronomical advisers, when they started their reformed year at the point called January 1, missed by only seven days one of the most logical possible yearly starting points—the winter solstice.

This is a logical starting point for the people of the northern hemisphere (and their interests have so far dominated world affairs) because at that time the

© Photograph from Helmig and Company

A HANDICAP EVENT ON THE BALI NEW YEAR'S RACING CARD

Certain cows are sacred in the Dutch East Indies, but this doesn't exempt them from being raced during the annual New Year's Festival, bedecked with fanciful headdresses and enormous bells hung around their necks (See Bulletin No. 1).

GEOGRAPHIC NEWS BULLETIN

Published Weekly by

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

(Founded in 1888 for the Increase and Diffusion of Geographic Knowledge)

General Headquarters, Washington, D. C.

Kottbus Feasts on Eels and Cucumbers

DOES the name of the town Kottbus, Germany, suggest anything?

Three and a half years ago it was blazed across the front pages of the newspapers of the world when Clarence Chamberlin brought the trans-Atlantic plane *Columbia* down in a field 9 miles southeast of the town, at the hamlet of Klinge.

Kottbus again came into the world's news last month, but this time it crept in under a modest headline announcing that the town is in financial difficulties and that a State commissioner has been appointed to adjust its affairs.

Fall River of Prussia

Kottbus, the Fall River of Prussia, is a textile town where more than 6,000 hands are employed in the woolen and cotton mills.

Klinge and Kottbus lie on the edge of the low, flat, wooded regions known as the Spreewald swamp, land of the Wends, a fragment of a lost tribe, who live largely by their eel-traps, cucumber patches, and their more prosaic hayfields and cherry orchards.

These Wends are the descendants of a band of half wild fugitives who, when the Goths laid waste Western Europe, hid for safety in the great swamps.

Chamberlin's landfall must have been a difficult one in this water-laced region. Kottbus is on the Spree, which rises in the mountains of the Czechoslovakia border. In the vicinity of Kottbus it began to spread out into the wooded swamp called the Spreewald.

Favorite Vacation Spot

After winding through two lakes dotted with islands, the Spree flows into Berlin. The upper reaches of the Spree afford favorite vacation spots for Berliners, who look upon it much as Chicagoans look upon the Wisconsin Lake District.

When thousands from near-by cities flock to this quaint nook of Europe in summer the Wend natives cash in on their cucumbers, their eels, and cherry pies, and reap a rich harvest from the oddly carved wooden geese and dolls they make. They also take toll from the couples and sightseers who pole up and down the labyrinth of water lanes dividing the Spreewald into a thousand charming green isles.

To this place, too, all kinds of societies and bunds come for their outings. Many walking clubs of school boys and girls go there from Berlin and Leipzig.

Mating Eels with Cucumbers

The Spreewald eel, slim and slippery, is enshrined in the songs and traditions of this singular community. A Spreewald swamp home without its eel-traps would be like a chicken farm without chicken coops. And the eels, gastronomically, are mated for life with the cucumbers! These giant cucumbers, deadly green in shade and wickedly carved like scimitars, threaten you at every turn.

Cucumbers lie in heaps everywhere. Punts piled high with the cucumbers are poled to market at Burg or Kottbus; men, women and children are plucking, peeling, or eating cucumbers, and even sleep on piles of them.

The Wends are clannish, isolated, and happiest when left alone and are concerned not at all with the rise and fall of nations around them.

sun has completed its apparent yearly retreat to the south, and has turned back northward, bringing increased light and warmth.

Year 1 A. D. Based on Wrong Calculations

When Caesar reformed the calendar this great event took place on December 25. When growing Christianity, after trying other dates, chose December 25 as the date on which to celebrate the birth of Jesus, it chose the day that had been marked out under the Julian system by the winter solstice. But even then the date, owing to the Julian error, had moved from the solstice; and by the time the Christmas celebration became general, the calendar had crawled forward until the day called December 25 occurred four days later than the solstice.

As the centuries passed, Christmas crawled ten additional days away from the solstice. When Pope Gregory applied his correction to the calendar he pushed December 25 ten days back of its farthest advance, but left it still four days away from the winter solstice.

The Christian Era as a time-measuring device, distinguished by the numbering of the years in both directions from the supposed birth year of Christ, was not proposed until about 527 A. D. and did not come into general use in Europe until about 1000 A. D. In the year 527, the evidence as to the time of Christ's birth was not very dependable, and it is now believed by many scholars that the calculations on which the Christian Era was based were in error by from three to seven years.

We call our new year "1931," therefore, not because we know it to be the nineteen hundred and thirty-first year since the birth of Christ, but because a monk named Dionysius Exiguus wrongly calculated the birth year. If the present year bore its strictly proper label, it would probably be numbered between 1934 and 1938, A. D.

Bulletin No. 1, January 5, 1931.

Supplementary reading on time measuring devices may be found in "North America's Oldest Metropolis," *National Geographic Magazine*, July, 1930; "The Secret of the Southwest Solved by Talkative Tree Rings," December, 1929; "Here and There in Northern Africa," January, 1914; "Chronometer and Time Service of the U. S Naval Observatory," October, 1904.

GEOGRAPHIC NEWS BULLETIN

Published Weekly by

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

(Founded in 1888 for the Increase and Diffusion of Geographic Knowledge)

General Headquarters, Washington, D. C.

A Bird's-Eye View of Devil's Island

ONE of the most famous places in the world is Devil's Island, in French Guiana. Every year the old *La Mariniere,* last convict ship of the twentieth century, sails from France with a cargo of prisoners including many "lifers" who will spend the rest of their days in the living death of this tropic land from which few return.

This year the voyage of the sinister old vessel has been delayed. An explosion and fire, causing leaks, has given 500 criminals a respite of several weeks.

How Devil's Island looks from the air is told in a report to the National Geographic Society by Frederick Simpich, recently in charge of The Society's aerial survey party which made a study of air traffic lanes between Washington and Buenos Aires.

Three Little Dots

"With M. Siadous, Governor General of French Guiana," writes Mr. Simpich, "we flew from Cayenne to Devil's Island. Here Captain Dreyfus languished through long, lonely years till freed by Emile Zola's aid. His dramatic trial, uncovering the amazing Count Esterhazy plot, stirred the civilized world.

"Three tiny green dots rise from the sea 27 miles north of Cayenne. They form the penal group, 'Isles du Salut," which include St. Joseph with its prison hospital, Isle Royale with tiers of tiny stone cells for incorrigibles, and Devil's Island, so famed in tales of fact and fiction.

"Men without women gazed up from behind high walls as we idled overhead. For women are no longer sent to this 'great penitentiary of France.' Here and in Cayenne are about 7,000 French prisoners, including such colonials as Arabs, Africans and even French Indo-Chinese.

Island of Spies

"But on Devil's Island to-day, despite its world-wide notoriety, only nine men are confined—mostly spies. They are lifers, and three of them are aviators. They were among the little group gazing up at us. I wondered what their thoughts must be as they saw our big ship flying free in their own once familiar element—able to carry them so quickly to freedom were they only up in it. . . . Hard by, on Isle Royale, are prison graves, row on row, where now men of high and low degree sleep side by side, their earthly penalties paid.

"Returning from Devil's Island, we took Governor Siadous for a ride over the delta of the Kourou.

Rich Soil but No Farmers

"Miles inland we could see low, tree-painted ridges, with round-top hills enjoying such local names as Monkey Hill and Devil Mountain. Into that hard land gold-seekers go. Gold now, in ever-dwindling volume, is the chief export. Incredibly rich as the soil is, agriculture is limited by lack of labor. Most of the 'Condamnees,' though farmed out by the government to work for private masters, are too weak in mind or body—or both—to till the soil in this trying climate.

"Efforts to colonize free men, on a big scale, have brought no good results. The average person shuns French Guiana, because so many convicts are there. But one is amazed at the good order. By seven o'clock the small town of Cayenne is dark.

"Dilapidated Cayenne, with weed-grown plazas, weather-beaten houses, and its rough streets cleaned only by buzzards, is depressing to normal souls. Weeping

Every Family Has a Boat

A Spreewald village is usually a little Venice. Instead of having streets and sidewalks, it is served entirely by crooked water streets. Every family has at least one boat. After a wedding ceremony, a bridal pair, instead of dashing away in a motor, climb into a boat and sit down beneath a canopy of evergreen twigs and flowers. Even the school bus is a boat (see cover page).

It would be more feasible to land an airplane in this region in winter, when the entire Spreewald is frozen over and becomes a spider web of icy lanes and avenues. Then the Wend wears special ice shoes with his skates built fast to them; and, instead of taking the cow to and from her pasture in a flat bottom boat, he loads her on to a sled.

Wendish Superstitions

Some of the old Wendish superstitions, dating back 1,500 years, find echoes to-day in many rural American communities. For example, the Wends say that a crowing hen must be killed or she will bring bad luck. Wendish belief common among other races is that when a man dies a window should be opened, so that his soul may take its flight.

If it thunders during a Spreewald wedding, every one is very unhappy, for this is a bad omen. Make a wish when you see a shooting star and the wish will come true.

During certain dances held in the spring the farmers jump up into the air, believing that the higher they jump on this occasion the higher their flax will grow.

Bulletin No. 2, January 5, 1931.

See also "The Wends of the Spreewald," March, 1923, and "The Races of Europe," December, 1918, *National Geographic Magazine.*

© *National Geographic Society*

MONTEZUMA'S PEOPLE TOLD TIME BY THIS DEVICE

The Calendar Stone, or Stone of the Sun, was originally a part of the walls of the ancient temple of Tenochtitlan, in Mexico City. Signs carved on its face indicate that it was used by the Aztecs both as a sundial and calendar (See Bulletin No. 1).

GEOGRAPHIC NEWS BULLETIN

Published Weekly by

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

(Founded in 1888 for the Increase and Diffusion of Geographic Knowledge)

General Headquarters, Washington, D. C.

World-Wide Styles in Hairdress

AFTER "bobbed" hair won a feminine victory, fashion arbiters, whose dictates often have widespread economic effects, now are arguing whether it is fashionable to "let it grow" again.

Most modern changes affecting "woman's crowning glory" are far from new. From Helen of Troy to movie queens, and from Broadway to far-off Africa, women of all ages and colors have used ringlets, curls and plaits to heighten their charm. The made-to-order wave has been known for centuries. Even in ancient times curled hair was considered more attractive than straight and, if Nature did not offer waves, Art supplied them.

The fair Poppea Sabina, Empress of Rome (A. D. 65), and domineering influence over the boy king Nero, had her hair made into a mass of small ringlets, plastered close to her head by the use of salves, unguents and often a kind of mud. Observe almost any statuary of women in the Greek style and you will find this stonelike wave predominant, and, most notable of all, in the familiar Statue of Liberty.

Combs and Hairpins Used Thousands of Years Ago

Crude curling irons, combs that resemble stiff paint brushes, crushed henna leaves and other herbs for dyeing were the accessories used. Long hairpins and brilliantine in the form of oils and ointments usually completed the coiffure.

Hair and hairdressing is also "woman's crowning glory" among the uncivilized women of African tribes, who subject themselves to endless suffering to perfect their headdresses. In the Belgian Congo a beauty spends several days arranging a coiffure which lasts six months or more. Literally hundreds of tight, small plaits, resembling the everyday dust-mop, fall from the center of the head.

Another tribe starts in infancy to change the shape of the skull by binding it with bands of giraffe hide and hair. These are tightened from year to year as the head grows larger and longer, enabling the women to make an unusual and striking headdress. A sort of wooden framework of circular bands is placed on the back of the head, and the long woolly hair is closely woven and bound around the frame. The result is an inverted basket which flares at the edge. (See illustration.)

Rabbit Ear Coiffures

Most picturesque of all is a black Psyche who combs her frizzes straight up, then parts them in the middle and works them into two horn-shaped projections. The effect is of long, stiff rabbit ears.

Decorating the hair with feathers, flowers and ribbons has been a custom followed through the centuries. In the French courts such favorites as Isabella of Bavaria, LaDuthe and the Countess of Artois stripped the ostrich and killed the shellfish to supply plumes and pearls for their hair. It took a headful of ringlets and curls to anchor the large, plume-bedecked cart-wheel hat worn by Gainsborough's famous "Duchess of Devonshire."

The celebrated queen of world tragedy, Marie Antoinette of France, wore a curled-all-over hairdress, with ingenue shoulder curls. And for originality the English poet and novelist, Letitia Landon, parted her dark tresses and tied them in a bow for a topknot.

women and despondent men sit idly about its cheap cafes or wander under the small grove of strangely conspicuous royal palms which lift their graceful trunks above the squalor of its principal plaza. 'Liberés,' such half-free prisoners are called. Though their days of actual confinement are ended, they are at liberty only within the borders of Cayenne.

"A convict, sent here for a term longer than eight years, must remain for life; he is known as a 'prisoner in perpetuity.' But a man sent for a lesser period, say for five years, must remain an additional five in the colony—or one year on the 'island' for each year spent in its jails—before he can return to France. Then he must pay his own way home.

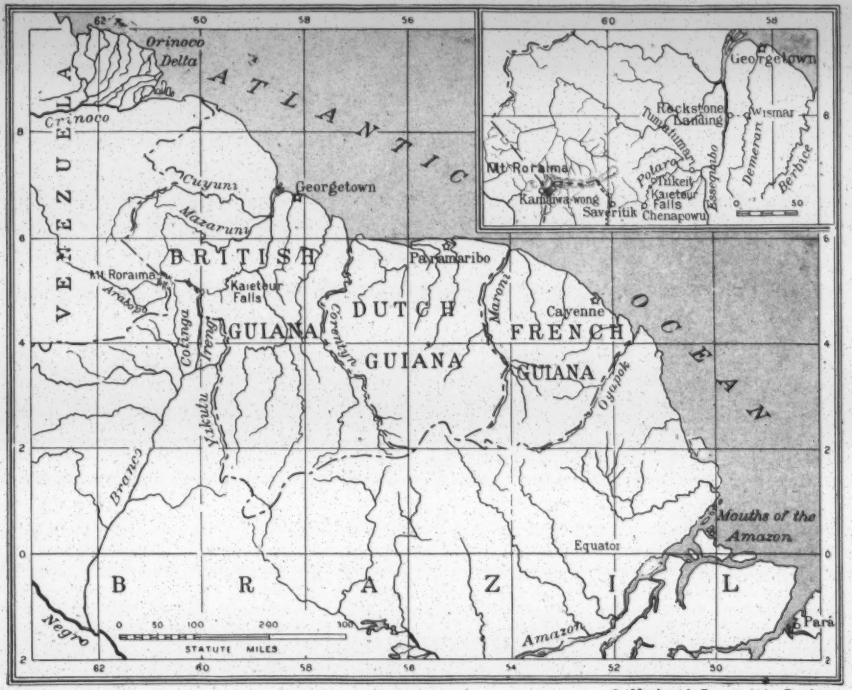
Brothers in Misery

"Lawyers, doctors, engineers, artists, skilled artisans, as well as criminals from the peasant class and the slums of Paris—these you see in the streets. Many seek to earn a few francs, at any kind of work, in a lost city where even petty tasks are few. 'That tall, ragged, barefooted man driving that milk-goat from house to house is a French gentleman of a fine old family,' said my guide.

"'The dry Guillotine' is the convicts' grim nickname for this penal colony, officially designated as such by Napoleon III in 1854."

Bulletin No. 3, January 5, 1931.

Photographs and additional descriptive matter concerning Devil's Island and the Guianas may be found in "Skypaths through Latin America," *National Geographic Magazine*, January, 1931; "The Great Falls and the Great Mountains of the Guianas," September, 1920; "Brazil-French Guiana Boundary Decision," February, 1901, and "Through Brazil to the Summit of Mt. Roraima," November, 1930.



© *National Geographic Society*

A MAP OF THE THREE GUIANAS

The British, Dutch and French Guianas stretch for 700 miles across the northern coast of South America. The famous Devil's Island is one of three tiny bits of land and lies 27 miles north of Cayenne, capital of French Guiana. The insert shows the Mount Roraima district, described in the *National Geographic Magazine*, November, 1930.

GEOGRAPHIC NEWS BULLETIN

Published Weekly by

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

(Founded in 1888 for the Increase and Diffusion of Geographic Knowledge)

General Headquarters, Washington, D. C.

A Plant That Grew Without Soil

ON WOODLAND walks in the spring you may have noticed a small, delicate wild flower called the liverwort, growing among the barren rocks of an awakening hillside. An Alaskan relative of this American herald of the springtime is expected to throw new light on the stubborn problem of how vegetable life got its start on the surface of the earth.

Dr. Robert F. Griggs, botanist and head of the National Geographic Society expedition to the Alaskan Peninsula last summer, has just made a preliminary report of his researches among the plants brought back from areas smothered by volcanic ash eighteen years ago, during the great eruption of Katmai Volcano.

Delicate Plant Lives on Soilless Ash

On the wastes of volcanic ash around Mt. Katmai none of the ordinary higher plants, such as grasses, could grow; and for many years the ash areas remained wholly bare. In order that such plants can live, their roots must penetrate *soil*—that is, bits of earth or pulverized rock mixed with decayed animal or vegetable matter containing nitrogen compounds.

Dr. Griggs discovered that delicate little plants called liverworts are now thriving on ash areas in which there are apparently no traces of nitrogen. Where the liverworts have been established long enough to decay and so form the beginnings of soil, other plants are starting to grow.

Thus the liverwort, or some tiny living thing associated with it, seems to be a pioneer in making possible the growth of vegetation; and it is possible to guess, with a little more understanding, what took place in the dim past when the earth's surface was like that of a huge, lifeless cinder.

Failing to find nitrogen compounds in the ash on which the liverwort grew, Dr. Griggs is proceeding on the theory that the plant is able to obtain nitrogen from the air. In laboratory experiments in Washington on growing specimens brought from Alaska, he is seeking to find the mechanism which would make this possible.

Eruption Devastated Large Area

The problem of the return of vegetation to an area devastated by volcanic action has been a subject of research by the National Geographic Society for many years. Expeditions to study the matter were sent to the Alaska Peninsula by The Society under Dr. Griggs' leadership in 1915 and 1916.

As only a short time had then elapsed since the fall of the ash, little could be done toward solving the central problem of plant return; but the second expedition discovered one of the world's most spectacular volcanic phenomena, the "Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes," an area of more than 50 square miles, from which myriads of jets of superheated steam hissed.

This unique region, when brought to public notice by the National Geographic Society, was made into a National Monument by President Wilson.

Last summer's expedition found that the Valley has lost much of its heat and can now be traversed more easily. Many of the smaller steam jets have ceased to be active, but the larger ones continue to throw off great volumes of white vapor. Hundreds of highly colored "paint pots" and bubbling cauldrons of mud make the area comparable to Yellowstone Park, though even more active.

Fearful and wonderful were the coiffures of the gay nineties. They reached the extreme in their profusion of puffs and area of softly waving surface, made possible by concealed "rats."

The Dutch Cut Bob

Women have worn their hair long because they have always been taught to believe that the hair is the "crowning glory" of their appearance. In the past the bobbing fad was popular at the court of Louis the Fourteenth, and the "Dutch Cut" at the court of James the First. But the bob of to-day, which originated in war-time, is hardly a fad. American women declare they retained it as a custom of comfort and convenience and as a symbol of freedom.

Masculine taste in Biblical times dictated: "If a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her." But twentieth century women defiantly established the shapely shingle, the difficult long bob, the free windblown style, and the still freer boyish bob.

Bulletin No. 4, January 5, 1931.

For other unique African styles of hairdress consult "Through the Deserts and Jungles of Africa by Motor," in the *National Geographic Magazine*, June, 1926.

© *National Geographic Society*

THE FAVORITE WIFE OF A MANGEBETOU CHIEF

Women of Central Africa devote much of their time to bizarre arrangement of the hair.

The expedition made photographs of the interior of the crater of Katmai Volcano, which still shows some activity. It was found that the lake within the crater, which has disappeared and reappeared in the last fifteen years, again covers the crater floor.

Bulletin No. 5, January 5, 1931.

See also "Our Greatest National Monument," *National Geographic Magazine*, September, 1921; "The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes," April, 1919; February, 1918; and January, 1917; and "Volcanoes of Alaska," August, 1912. Additional material on plant life may be found in "Wild Flowers of America," which may be consulted in your school or local library.

© Photograph by Dr. R. F. Griggs

A BEAR TRAIL THAT SPROUTED

The fresh tracks in the waste of volcanic mud and ash caught the grass seed, which blew across the surrounding smooth general surface without finding any place of lodgment. This picture shows the character of the Alaskan country smothered by the great eruption of Katmai Volcano, and which is now fighting its way back to life.